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Leadership Competency Series

Resilience is the Hallmark of Successful Leadership

Resilient Leaders are unflappable even in stressful situations. They positively stay composed and derive desired results by managing emotions says M R CHANDRAMOWLY.

DEVAN was assigned to welcome the gathering of national dealers' meet. It was an important event for the company to get their dealers buy in on two initiatives: Price increase and rolling out a policy on business ethics. Devan, being the VP-Sales had a major role to tune up the mindset of the audience. He rehearsed to open his talk with a popular ice-breaker. It is about that sales person who visits an island where nobody wears shoes and says, "you can't sell shoes here since nobody wears shoes on this island". The other sales person who goes to the same island exclaims "look at that! Nobody wears shoes here what a potential market to get these people to buy our product"

Devan had carefully prepared to narrate the joke but he stopped before the punch line. He had forgotten it. He froze while his mind was blank. He could not speak any further and the notes he had prepared made no sense. With the riveted eyes of dealers and colleagues on him, he had to apologise and leave the podium. The CEO Manmohan managed to fill the gap with his address.

Only after the tea break, Devan was able to compose himself and came on stage to talk about the sales initiatives. Yes, he could complete the joke to a great applause. He was able to calm down lowering his stress level. In his initial bout of panic he could not remember what he was suppose to say. He was not able to control himself managing the stress.

Distressing emotions

There is a significant finding from the brain studies of people under stress. David Goleman says, "When the mind is calm, working memory functions at it best. But when there is an emergency, the brain shifts into a self-protective mode, stealing resources from working memory and shunting them to other brain sites in order to keep the senses hyper alert - a mental stance tailored to survival."

During an emergency, the brain falls back on simple, highly familiar routines and puts aside complex thoughts, creative insights and long term planning. It paralyses one's ability to recall a prepared speech. Our internal system of emergency management evolved millions of years ago and we experience its operation today in

the form of troubling emotions: worries, surges of anxiety, panic, frustration, irritation, anger or rage. When Mike Tyson became a victim of brain's alarm centre he bit off Evander Holyfield's ear during their 1997 heavyweight boxing title match. The cost of his auto response was a penalty of three million dollars and a year's suspension from boxing. During the surge of emotional stress, we fail to use capability of visualising the consequences of our action. People use stress management techniques and constantly practice to apply intellect with awareness. Understanding of Emotional Intelligence (EI) competencies will certainly help us to enhance our capability to mange emotions. Goleman's version has five dimensions of Emotional Intelligence related to 25 competencies. We review now the competency, "Self-Control" which is from the "Self-Regulation Cluster" of EI.

Staying Composed

Self Control is the principle of remaining calm despite provocation. It is about keeping disruptive emotions and impulses in check. People with this competency; manage their impulsive feelings and distressing emotions well. They stay composed, positive, and unflappable even in trying moments. They think clearly and stay focused even under pressure. They float above tough situations in a while without fight or flight.

I was having lunch in a company cafeteria and I saw the trade union secretary Narendra and his team also sitting nearby eating their lunch. It was early 80s of strong trade union rivalry and days of industrial disputes. Right at that time, a tool down strike was operating in the industrial complex. I was a one man HR supporting the division. I noticed Narendra ridiculing the canteen food and the situation looked like some thing will explode on some issue during this second day of the strike.

I glanced at Narendra, who is known for his emotional outburst and "igniter of showdowns". He suddenly got up and walked to me holding his soupspoon and his group followed him. His eyes bulging, face flushing with food particles flying out from his mouth, he shouted, "Mr Mowly, look here, there is a fly in my soup. What kind of management?...." He went on….I knew his next move. I could see the pictures of possible happenings. The lunch for over 600 employees will go waste, visit of health inspector, ransack of canteen, melee, lockout....I remained cool and looked in to Narendra's eyes for a readiness to receive my response.

In that flash time of a second or two, I could recollect my earlier jovial relationship with Narendra. I took out the dead fly from the spoon and while examining it said "Hey Narendra, yes, its a fly. For a big guy like you, you expect, an elephant to appear in your meal? If so, you are over ambitious....I think a fly is OK! I know you love Chinese food and I do not think you have a problem with this fly.

Narendra's face changed with the curvature of his lips turning into a smile. Humour took over on what appeared to be a potential explosion. We all went out with bursting laughter. As Narendra and his group moved to the annexed tobacco shop, I

walked towards my office.

Self-Control in action

When emotions boil over, it puts us over the edge and some times it seems like that and we are nearer to a breaking point. If we let lose our emotion, the immediate impact is on blood flow. Blood is shunted away from the brain's higher cognitive centres to others sites essential for emergency mobilisation. Levels of blood sugar available jumps and the heart rate climbs to prepare the body to fight or run. During that moment, we do what we have mostly rehearsed. It is here we have an opportunity to practice and develop the competency of self-control. It is difficult for the old habits to die but it is not impossible. The key factor for self-control is reduction of fear. While complete removal of fear is impossible and against nature, it can be reduced largely. If you make an acronym of FEAR, it is " False Evidence Appearing Real."

It is float, not fight or flight

The brain imaging studies of Richard Davidson shows, the resilient people have remarkably rapid recoveries from stress than the vulnerable people who escalate their distress for several minutes after the culmination of stressful activity. Davidson says "These are optimistic, action-oriented people. If something goes wrong in their lives, they immediately start to think about how to make it better."

Research reveals that, if stress is sustained, the likely end state is burnout or even worse. The hormones we secrete under stress are enough for a single bout of fight or flight — but once secreted, they stay in the body for hours and more such collection can trigger into anger for even a least provocation.

Emotional self-control is not the same as over-control, the stifling of all feeling and spontaneity. People who stifle their feelings, especially strong negative ones, raise their heart rate, a sign of negative tension. It can impair thinking and hamper intellectual performance. The point is exercising our choice of how we express our feeling and in what fineness.

Self-control is crucial for law enforcers and those who move up the corporate ladder. They are able to perform, deliver better and professionally grow based on how they display the competency of self-control. Are smart people able to cope with emotions? Yes, but many of them are not, or at least they are not coping up with emotions very well. Have we not seen highly intelligent people walk blindly through the realms of human emotions? They run through reasons without sensitivity driven by impulses of the mind disconnecting the ability to manage emotions.

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